



National College for
Teaching & Leadership

The golden age of school food

Henry Dimbleby and John Vincent,
School Food Plan (SFP)

Opinion piece

The golden age of school food

1/7

Henry Dimbleby and John Vincent, School Food Plan (SFP)

Henry Dimbleby is co-author, with John Vincent, of the School Food Plan (SFP). Together, they run Leon, the chain of quality fast-food restaurants. The SFP set out 17 actions that are being carried out to support headteachers in developing a great food culture in their schools. These included:

- all children in reception to year 2 receiving free school meals
- practical cookery becoming a compulsory part of the national curriculum for key stages 1 to 3
- the government making money available for professional organisations to support schools to increase the take-up of school lunches
- the government providing funding to introduce breakfast clubs to hundreds of schools across the country
- Ofsted announcing revisions to guidance for its inspectors instructing them to consider how lunchtime and the dining space contribute to good behaviour and the broader school culture, and asking school leaders how they help to ensure a healthy lifestyle for their children

What does a school with an amazing food culture look like? Carshalton Boys Sports College is not blessed with a great location. A large aerial photo in the headteacher's office shows the academy as a tiny rectangle in the middle of a red-brick estate that sprawls to the edge of the frame in every direction. It is one of the largest estates in Europe, where 40 per cent of the children are eligible for free school meals (FSM).

When Simon Barber became headteacher at Carshalton 10 years ago, just 4 per cent of its pupils achieved five GCSEs at A* to C grades including English and Maths. The atmosphere and the discipline were terrible. School dinners weren't just bad, they were virtually non-existent. Children were actually locked out of the main school building for the duration of the lunch break to give the teachers a break from the mayhem.

But Simon believed that the canteen ought to be the centre of school life. It was the one place where the whole school could meet in an informal setting, where teachers and children could sit down together to eat and talk and, in doing so, cultivate a happier atmosphere. He wanted his pupils to learn table manners, not as a snobbish display of gentility, but as an expression of consideration, courtesy and social skills.

So, how did he entice his pupils back into the canteen? First, he hired an experienced restaurant chef, Dave Holdsworth, who was capable of producing food better than anything they could find at a local fast-food outlet. He also introduced a stay-on-site policy for younger children to get them into the habit of eating well. Dave makes proper food taste so good that children have flocked back to the canteen. From a low of 20%, take-up is now at 80 per cent.

But Carshalton hasn't stopped there. It also offers a £1 breakfast for boys turning up early and a free curry in the late afternoon for those staying late. In the classroom, cooking lessons are compulsory for all children up to the age of 14. They even run a 'lads and dads' course where the boys teach their fathers how to cook, in order to tackle the broader problem of malnourishment in the local area. They have chickens laying eggs and a garden club growing vegetables, all of which get used in the school kitchen.

None of this is seen as a distraction from the rest of the curriculum. On the contrary, it is just part of Simon's mission to nurture the whole child. The school also excels in sport and drama, as well as more academic subjects. In 2012, 100% of its children got five GCSEs at A* to C grades – 60 per cent including English and Maths – putting Carshalton in the top 5 per cent of the most improved state secondary schools.

Simon is in no doubt about the connection between food and academic achievement:

For many of my boys, this lunch will be their main meal of the day. Good food makes them happy, but also helps them work better," he says. "And the culture and behaviour that begin in the canteen are responsible for an atmosphere that supports attainment across the whole school.

As a headteacher I always wanted to make sure that my children ate a good school lunch. Not only does a good quality lunch improve a pupil's concentration in the afternoon, but the atmosphere in the canteen is critical to encouraging good behaviour.

More than that, lunch is the only time of day when the whole school – children and teachers – have a chance to come together. The atmosphere of the canteen sets a tone for the rest of the school and helps to establish the school's culture.

Great schools do all things well. They not only nurture a child's mind through outstanding teaching; they nurture the whole child through sport, art and food. Only with a combination of all of these things will we enable our children to reach their full potential.

Sir Michael Wilshaw, Chief Inspector of Schools

Researching and creating the School Food Plan

The first thing we did when we were asked to put together the School Food Plan was to visit a school. Over the past year, we have been to – and eaten in – more than 60 schools all over England, and heard from hundreds more. We have spoken to children, teachers, parents, cooks, caterers, nutritionists, volunteers and charity workers, and industry bodies, many of them doing amazing work to improve the quality of school food. We have read the reports and papers that have been written on various aspects of school food, commissioned our own research, and taken a thorough look under the bonnet to understand the structure and economics of the service.

The picture that emerged was far more positive than we expected. The quality of food in England's schools has improved enormously since 2005, when Jamie Oliver alerted the nation to the horrors of the Turkey Twizzler. In primary schools and secondary schools there has been a clear improvement in nutritional standards, and a reduction in junk foods. The best schools do an extraordinary job of weaving food education – cooking, gardening, and even modest efforts at animal husbandry – through the curriculum.

But there is still a lot of work to be done. Too many schools are lagging behind, serving food that is boring, beige and bland. Take-up of school food remains stubbornly low, at 43 per cent. That means that 57 per cent of children are not eating school lunches at all. Some graze instead on snack foods served at mid-morning break (when the standard offerings tend to be panini, pizza and cake). Others go off-site to buy their lunch – usually junk food – or bring in a packed lunch. This is almost always less healthy than a proper cooked meal: only 1 per cent of packed lunches meet the nutritional standards that currently apply to school food.

There are many reasons why this matters: not least an obesity epidemic that threatens to overwhelm the NHS and drain the public coffers. But teachers, in particular, have a vested interest in the quality and popularity of their school lunches, and in the broader food culture of their school.

Simon's insight – that better food would make better pupils – is borne out by a growing mountain of research. From 2009 to 2011, for example, the Labour government ran pilot schemes in Durham and Newham, providing free school meals for all primary school pupils. As these children abandoned packed lunches in favour of more nutritious cooked meals, there was a marked improvement in academic attainment. Children in these schools soon moved ahead of their peers by almost a term. The policy was shown to do more to improve literacy levels than the nationwide introduction of a compulsory 'literacy hour' in 1998.

The reasons for this are social as well as nutritional. The scheme removed the stigma associated with free school meals, and allowed the whole school – teachers and children – to come together every day to break bread in a civilised environment. It created a sense of unity, and reinforced positive behaviour throughout the day.

Most people working in education instinctively understand this. For our School Food Plan researches, we commissioned a survey of more than 400 headteachers: 200 of them from secondary schools (of which half were academies) and 200 from primaries. Some 91 per cent agreed that “eating healthy, nutritious food improves attainment”, while a similar proportion believed that it improved behaviour.

But desire doesn't always translate into action. Many heads feel understandably daunted by the thought of turning around a lacklustre kitchen, or coaxing pupils away from the bright lights of the local fried chicken shop. In our survey, 41 per cent of primary school heads and 31 per cent of secondary heads said they needed more advice and guidance. Some 20 per cent felt strongly that “food is on my radar, but is not a priority at the moment”. These heads know there is work to be done, but feel they don't have the time to do it. If you fall into this group, we would like to reassure you. With the right support and information, any kind of school can turn around its lunch service. We ate like kings in primary and secondary schools – both rural and urban, big and small, academies and maintained. Moreover, these schools all used different models of delivery: local authority caterers, private contractors and in-house caterers.

There were, however, three things that the best schools had in common:

- They adopt a whole-school approach, integrating food into the life of the school. This means treating:
 - the dining hall as the hub of the school, where children and teachers eat together
 - lunch as part of the school day
 - the cooks as important staff members
 - food as part of a rounded education
- They concentrate on the things children care about. These are:
 - Is it good food? The food needs to taste good, smell good and look good. For some children, it is important that it does them good too.
 - Can I eat it in an attractive environment? The area where children eat needs to be attractive, clean and light. It must smell enticing. The acoustics must allow children to hear each other. The school cooks and supervisors should be friendly and engaging.
 - Does it fit in with my social life? Children must be able to eat with their friends (regardless of whether they have a packed lunch or school dinner). Queues need to be short. It must not be possible to identify free school meal children. Children need to have enough time in their lunch break to eat their meal and then and go out to play or attend clubs. The lunch break should not be too late or too early in the day.
 - Is it sold at a price my family can afford? The price needs to be low enough to compete with packed lunches, so that children from poorer families who don't quite qualify for free school meals can still afford to eat well.

- Is the brand strong? School food needs to be the thing to have. Its reputation among children, parents and teachers needs to be good. This requires role-modelling by the cool kids and by teachers. It helps if children are able to get involved in planning the menu and their dining hall environment, growing some of the ingredients or even helping out in the kitchen during lunch. It is also really important that teachers eat with the children.
- They have a headteacher who leads the change. Schools like Carshalton do not come about by government decree. They are driven by great leaders, and by cooks who are given the right circumstances in which to flourish. This may seem like an obvious point but, until quite recently, school dinners were generally regarded as something that was done to schools by the local council – not something for which headteachers felt responsible.

This does not mean the head should do all the work. They need a good support team, ideally including an energetic business manager or deputy head, a talented and adaptable cook, and at least one determined parent or governor. But without the will and enthusiasm of the head, nothing will change. One local authority caterer showed us the take-up rates of the different schools in her borough. “The schools with low take-up have one thing in common,” she said. “The headteachers wouldn’t support us. You can forget making things better if the head is not behind the whole thing.”

Our own number crunching supports this anecdotal evidence. In our survey, we asked headteachers how important they thought providing good school food was (we defined this as their ‘will’) and how confident they were that they had the skills to do so (their ‘skill’).

We then divided them into categories:

- **High skill** – 20 per cent of headteachers said they have both high will and high skill, and a further 5 per cent said they have medium will and high skill. Their schools are mainly urban and over half are academies. They have the most cashless systems and they are the least likely to sell confectionery; 65 per cent of these schools have brought their catering in-house, citing “quality” and “financial reasons” as the two biggest motives for doing so.
- **High or medium will/medium skill** – 45 per cent of heads thought they had high or medium will, and medium skill. These heads told us they do not need convincing that school food is important. What they do need is practical advice and support. Many of these schools have breakfast clubs and garden clubs – evidence that they are already making big efforts. In contrast to the high skill/high will group, less than 5 per cent do their catering in-house, preferring to use private or local authority caterers instead. The reasons they cite for this choice of provision are “we inherited it” (44 per cent), “financial reasons” (22 per cent) and “because we had to” (19 per cent). These heads need the confidence to push their current provider to improve quality, or to bring their food in-house.

- **High or medium will/low skill** – 13 per cent had high or medium will but admitted to low skill. These headteachers want to make things better but they would welcome quite intensive support to turn things around.
- **Low will** – 17 per cent of headteachers were honest enough to tell us they had low will. Even if they are convinced of the benefits of eating well, they don't regard school food as a priority. There are simply too many other things to take care of.

If you are one of those leaders who is keen to make a change in your school, you don't have to do it alone. Not only can you enlist the help of your staff, pupils, parents and the governing body, but there are also many private companies, not-for-profit organisations and charities that offer direct advice and support to schools on their school food. (You can find a comprehensive list of these along with a checklist for headteachers who want to improve their food culture at www.schoolfoodplan.com.)

If you are one of the 17 per cent who feels there are more pressing concerns, we would urge you to think again. We spoke to heads at many schools who took a long time to make the change. They all said that, in retrospect, they wished they had done it earlier. The transformative effect of a thriving canteen – and a wider food culture that inspires pupils and draws them together – made it easier for them to raise standards in every other area of school life. In school, as in life, food shouldn't be a distraction from the main event: it should be an elemental part of it.

Taking the food in your school seriously isn't a marginal concern. It isn't just about making your children happy every day by serving them good food – although this, in itself, is important enough. It is about instilling the pleasures of growing, cooking and eating proper food. It is about using the dining room to help cement a positive school culture. It is also about improving the academic performance of our children and the health of our nation.

Colleagues considering the above might reflect, in particular, on the following questions:

- How would you characterise your level of skill and will (or that of the leadership team in your school) when it comes to creating a great food culture? How is this reflected in the current food culture in the school?
- How well does your school perform on the things that matter most when improving school lunches? What is the head doing to lead the way? Is there a whole-school approach to school food and food education? How well does the lunch service meet the needs of the children?
- Do teachers in your school regularly eat with the children? Do the children have an opportunity to learn social skills – table manners, polite conversation, sharing ideas and aspirations – from teachers, older children and their peers?

References

- Alaimo, K, Olson, C M and Frongillo, E A, 2001, Food insufficiency and American school-aged children's cognitive, academic and psychosocial development in *Pediatrics*, 108(1):44–53
- Bellisle, F, 2004, Effects of diet on behaviour and cognition in children, in *British Journal of Nutrition*, Suppl. 2:S227–S232
- Belot, M and James, J, 2009, *Healthy school meals and educational outcomes*, Institute for Social & Economic Research Working Paper No. 2009–01
- Center on Hunger, Poverty and Nutrition Policy, 1998, *Statement on the link between nutrition and cognitive development in children*, Tufts University, Medford, Massachusetts, USA
- Dimbleby, H and Vincent, J, 2013, Why it matters – evidence on health and attainment, Appendix C, in *The School Food Plan*
- Evans, C et al, 2010, A cross-sectional survey of children's packed lunches in the UK: food- and nutrient-based results, in *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health*
- Kitchen, S et al, 2010, *Evaluation of the free school meals pilot: impact report*, Research Report DFE-RR227
- Kitchen, S, Poole, E and Reilley, N, 2013, *School food: head teachers' and school senior managers' perceptions survey*, NatCen Social Research
- Kleinman, R E et al, 1998, Hunger in children in the United States: potential behavioral and emotional correlates, in *Pediatrics*, 101(1):E3
- Murphy, J M et al, 2000, *The Boston public schools universal breakfast program: final evaluation report*, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts, USA
- Nelson, J et al, 2011, *Food growing activities in schools*, NFER, Report submitted to Defra
- Nelson, M, Nicholas, J, Riley, K and Wood, L, 2012, *Seventh annual survey of take up of school lunches in England*, School Food Trust
- Pollitt, E, Cueto, S and Jacoby, E R, 1998, Fasting and cognition in well- and undernourished schoolchildren: a review of three experimental studies, in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, 67(4):779S–784S
- Sorhaindo, A and Feinstein, L, 2006, What is the relationship between child nutrition and school outcomes?, in *Wider Benefits of Learning Research Report No.18*
- Storey, H C et al, 2011, A randomized controlled trial of the effect of school food and dining room modifications on classroom behaviour in secondary school children, in *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, 65, 32–38



National College for
Teaching & Leadership

© Crown copyright 2014, National College for Teaching and Leadership.

Reproduced with the permission of the National College for Teaching and Leadership under delegated authority from the Controller of HMSO. To reuse this material, please contact the Membership Team at the National College or email college.publications@nationalcollege.gsi.gov.uk.